

REVIEW OF *LITERATE LIVES IN THE INFORMATION AGE: NARRATIVES OF LITERACY FROM THE UNITED STATES*

Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States

Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher

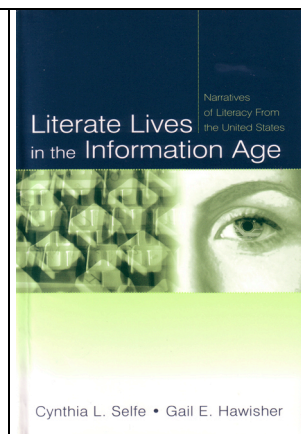
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Review by Bethany E. Gray, Iowa State University

Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States (henceforth, S&H) offers readers detailed narratives, which authors Selfe and Hawisher call "technological literacy autobiographies" (S&H, p. 7), on the development of technological literacy practices and values by twenty individuals. The goal of the volume is to examine how factors such as age, gender, ethnic and racial group, and geographical background interplay with historical, cultural, economic, and political factors to affect a person's development (or lack thereof) of technological literacy in a society where such literacies are hailed as a necessity. Selfe and Hawisher refer to these factors as the "cultural ecology of literacy" (S&H, p. 5). Fully cognizant of the conflicting views on defining *technological literacies*¹, Selfe and Hawisher define their use of the term in their introduction as "the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices—cultural, social, political, and educational" (S&H, p. 2, footnote 4).

The technological literacy autobiographies in this volume come from a larger research project conducted over the past six years. Citing Brandt's (2001) methodology, Selfe and Hawisher utilized a standard interview protocol administered either face-to-face or electronically to over 350 participants. The authors selected twenty of these participants to be included in this volume as they represent differing cultural, historical, and economic backgrounds. The book is structured into seven chapters encased by an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter contains two to four case studies in which the authors have included quotations from interviews in an attempt to maintain the personality and voice of the participants, an attempt that is successful. While the introduction and conclusion are written solely by Hawisher and Selfe, the seven chapters are co-authored by the subjects of the case studies. Citing Brettell (1996) as their inspiration, the authors bring a unique and personal aspect to each chapter through this collaboration.

Chapter 1, "Cultural Ecologies and the Literacies of Technology," co-authored by Damon J. Davis, Sally A. Osborne, and Jill R. Van Wormer, focuses on race and poverty while exploring the experiences of three undergraduate students born in the late 1970s at the crux of the integration of personal microcomputers into homes and schools. Selfe and Hawisher claim this chapter "defines and exemplifies the definition of a cultural ecology" (S&H, p. 25) and explore the "duality of structure" (Giddens, 1979, cited in S&H, p. 32) concept: although an individual's actions and technological literacies are shaped

by his/her economical, cultural, and historical environment, so too is one's cultural ecology shaped by one's technological literacy.

Co-authored by Paula Boyd, Karen Lunsford, and Mary Sheridan-Rabideau, and titled "Privileging—or Not—the Literacies of Technology," the second chapter investigates the role of class, gender, and identity in the literate lives of three women born in the late 1960s, a period Selfe and Hawisher claim is significant to many minority groups, including the women in this chapter, in discussions of literacy development due to the resurgence of feminism and other social movements. Focusing on the way these three women developed technological literacies after being introduced to technology through word processing and computer gaming during their high school and college years, the stories provide support for the concepts of age and gender cohorts—the idea that individuals who grew up at similar times developed similar literacy practices because those practices were shaped by the historical context.

Chapter 3, "Complicating Access: Gateways to the Literacies of Technology," co-authored by Dean Woodbeck and Dennis Walikainen, focuses on the issue of access to technology as it is related to race, class, and the concepts of *technology gateways* and *conditions of access* (including timing, motivation, fit, and appropriateness of equipment). The authors define technology gateways as "places and situations in which individuals typically gain access to computers for the purpose of practicing digital literacy" (S&H, p. 85). The authors point out that although we know statistically that access to technology affects the rate of technological literacy, these statistics do not describe how access interplays with other factors such as historical context and social and economical circumstances that affect the daily lives and development of students.

Chapter 4, co-authored by Thomas A. Lugo and Melissa Pearson, and titled "Shaping Cultures: Prizing the Literacies of Technology," studies the experiences of two writing instructors born in very different cultures (Latino and African American) in 1964. The authors seek to explore the role of culture on the development of technological literacies. Citing Lemke (1995), they claim that "literary practices and values are constitutive of culture, and they are fashioned by culture at the micro- [(e.g., race, religion, geography, and ethnicity)] ... and macro-levels [(e.g., societal institutions)]" (p. 110).

"Those Who Share: Three Generations of Black Women," co-authored by A. Nichole Brown, looks at how family can influence the development of literacy. Specifically, this fifth chapter investigates a family within a Southern context where desegregation and the civil rights movement played a part in the opportunities these three generations encountered. The researchers found that the value the family placed on general literacy practices contributed significantly to new generations placing value on new technologies for communication.

In chapter 6, "Inspiring Women: Social Movements and the Literacies of Technology," Selfe, Hawisher, and co-authors Jane Parenti Blakelock, Jená Maddox Burges, and Janice R. Walker, describe the experiences of three 50-year old female writing instructors who followed non-traditional paths, for example, by delaying starting a family to complete an education or by returning to higher education at a later age in order to pursue a new career path. The authors also return to the concept of technology gateways, claiming that access to technology can "serve as gateways to educational and career opportunities" (S&H, p. 179). The case studies in this chapter support this idea by relating the stories of women who utilized their technical literacy skills in order to further their careers, which then led to further development of technological literacy.

The final chapter, co-authored by Dànienne De Voss, Charles Jackson, Joseph Johansen, and Brittney Moraski, and titled "The Future of Literacy," seeks to discover the direction and pace of the development of technological literacies in today's society by looking at the experiences of two 28-year old professionals and two high-school teenagers. The authors use these case studies to illustrate the need for incorporating formal instruction in technological literacies in educational systems. The case studies show

students placing more value and relevance on the technological skills (e.g., web design, graphic design programs, and gaming), which they developed without formal instruction, than the more traditional literacy practices they developed in school. Thus, the authors conclude that educational systems will need to transform along with technology in order to keep up with societal changes.

In their conclusion, Selfe and Hawisher extensively explain eight themes running through the case studies, which outline the role of cultural ecologies, race, ethnicity, class, gender, technology gateways, access, and family. The authors point to the need to increase our understanding of digital literacies, as well as to make changes in how we view literacy and the content of literacy instruction in our educational systems to account for these new literacies. Although a significant and timely implication in a constantly changing world, it is not a new concept. One early reference, for example, is Tuman (1992); a more recent discussion of new media in composition classrooms is provided by Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc (2004).

The greatest strength of this book is the expansive amount of historical, political, and economical facts Selfe and Hawisher provide throughout. Each chapter begins with a detailed description of the cultural ecology relevant to the case studies at hand. And albeit a necessary component of any study claiming to investigate the development of technological literacies as they are affected by context, it is the manner in which the authors interweave these facts with the stories of their co-authors that gives each fact a purpose in the dialogue. Texts containing extensive historical background can seem remote and tedious to readers, but Selfe and Hawisher's approach draws the reader in, mimicking the inherent connectedness between their co-authors' very personal histories and the national histories of the United States.

Although Selfe and Hawisher are careful to point out that these case studies are not meant to be generalized to a larger group of people, it is important to comment on the characteristics of the case study subjects, as this represents one limitation of the book. All but two participants had in fact achieved varying levels of technological literacy in various computer applications, including, but not limited to, word processing, programming, gaming, web authoring, communication via the Internet, and various graphical design programs. It would be interesting to also hear stories of those who have never achieved any significant level of technological literacy and to learn about their perceived limitations in today's digital world.

Furthermore, most participants come from academic environments, either as instructors or students, and a great majority of them come from language-based fields (for example, technical writing). The topic of electronic literacy is relevant to many other groups of people, too, for example, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. While Selfe and Hawisher do not approach this topic here, much research considers technological literacy for ESL students (cf. Warschauer, 1998, 1999). ESL learners are increasingly becoming members of the very groups discussed in this book and face many of the same issues as the case study subjects. Therefore, the volume would benefit from a few case studies concerning the technological literacy development of ESL learners.

This volume is detailed and comprehensive; however, the authors accomplish a good portion of that detail using footnotes. The footnotes are at times so numerous and extensive that half or more of the text on a page is footnotes (for example, pages 1-3), and footnotes may extend to a second page. These numerous footnotes impede the flow of reading, making readers jump between text and footnote, consequently creating a very disjointed, and at times, confusing reading experience. Furthermore, vital information is sometimes only explicated in footnotes. For example, the author's definition of *technological literacies*, a crucial concept for this text, appears in one of the four footnotes on page two. Such a definition is central to a reader's understanding of the research presented here, and thus deserves full and considerate attention in the main text.

Despite this minor detraction, *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States* is a conscientious description of twenty case studies that invites readers to reflect on how

their own cultures, experiences, and education, and the political and economic context surrounding their lives have impacted their development of technological literacies. Many readers will find themselves relating to one or more of the case study subjects, and this, coupled with the manner in which Selfe and Hawisher bring to life the personalities and words of their research participants, creates a book that is timely, relevant, and thought-provoking.

NOTES

1. Selfe and Hawisher cite Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola (1999), Kress (2003), and Gee (2003) for further discussions of *technological literacies*.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Bethany E. Gray is currently completing a MA in TESL/Applied Linguistics at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, where she has taught First Year Composition and ESL writing courses integrating concepts of written, oral, visual, and electronic (WOVE) communication. Her research interests include corpus linguistics, English for Academic Purposes, and computer-assisted language learning.

Email: bethanye@iastate.edu

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